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ABSTRACT

Project SOLID START is an integrated reading program involving regular classroom, special education, and reading teachers, and parent volunteers in the Melrose, Massachusetts public schools. SOLID START supports beginning literacy in a developmental, rather than a remedial, mode. The project tests the hypothesis that a carefully structured, integrated, intensive program that reinforces the regular first grade language arts curriculum will significantly reduce the number of children experiencing delay, difficulty, or failure in first grade. It is also expected that the program will help clarify distinctions between children with special needs and children who are not developmentally ready to meet classroom demands. Any child who appears to teachers to be at risk of inadequate progress in the first week of school is eligible for the program. However, children may enter the program at any time during the school year. Every day, each child received 1.5 hours of small group teaching in reading and writing, with a heavy emphasis on reading. Instruction is guided by encouragement of linguistic prediction, a focus on meaning, graphophonemic observation, and large doses of positive reinforcement. A metacognitive approach helps children become aware of their behaviors and assume control of their learning. In the 3 years of program operation, every child in first grade has learned to read and write. (RH)

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PROJECT SOLID START

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PROJECT RATIONALE

Project SOLID START, now in its third year, is an integrated program of reading, regular classroom and special education teachers as well as parent volunteers in the Melrose, MA public schools. Our approach is to support beginning literacy in a developmental, rather than a remedial model. "Zero Failure" in first grade is the goal of the program with immediately available support (fourth day of school) replacing a post-failure deficit model. The project is designed to test the hypothesis that a carefully structured, integrated and intensive program reinforcing the regular first-grade curriculum in language arts will significantly reduce the numbers of children experiencing delay, difficulty or failure in first grade. We further expect this program to assist us in clarifying distinctions between children with special needs and children experiencing developmental misfit with classroom demands. Our aim is to provide a joyful and confident start in first grade.

SOLID START attempts to demystify the process of reading and writing by comfortably assuming that some children will require more attention and more instructional time than others in early learning. The SOLID START population is selected by the classroom teachers without any formal protocols or testing of any kind. Any child who appears to be "at risk" to the teacher in the first week of school is eligible. Since children can move in and out of the program at the classroom teacher's discretion, there is no danger of neglect or overselection. A child can leave or join the program at any time during the school year. It is our view that children who make a confident and enthusiastic start will have fewer difficulties in subsequent years. We anticipate that this preventative approach will not only lessen the need for later remediation, but will reduce behavior problems from the very beginning.

The SOLID START program owes an immense debt to our friends and colleagues who have developed and shared whole-language and process-writing approaches. Their work remains a great inspiration and guide. Our program, however, focuses on those children whom we describe as "not-so-natural" learners, children for whom direct teaching in an intimate as well as highly interactive environment is necessary. In the three years since PROJECT SOLID START was initiated, our school has moved from a very traditional basal-bound curriculum to the beginnings of whole language. Since we are committed to the view that a child must succeed in the regular classroom in order to feel competent, we have closely supported the classroom program as it has evolved. In this process, we have become increasingly convinced that focusing our energies on "reading discovery" will leave us with fewer and fewer children requiring "reading recovery."

Each child in the program receives 1½ hours daily of small group teaching in reading/writing -- with the heavy emphasis on reading in effect offering the slower bloomer three times the reading instruction of his more mature or able peers. Our program also meets the needs of children who have difficulty attending or participating comfortably in group activities.

The SOLID START program has been a "quiet revolution", a process of reconciling developmental differences with classroom expectations. It has allowed us to change the focus from the child's failures or deficiencies to the child's accomplishments and to create a climate for modifying the environment rather than rectifying the child. It is our view that this model is widely replicable and is a necessary component of a contemporary and holistic approach to developmental literacy.

PROJECT SOLID START is predicated on these contentions:

- Early school failure is more frequently the result of a mismatch between the pace of the curriculum and the developmental status of the child than an identifiable learning disability.

- The difficulties created by this mismatch can be treated by direct teaching in small groups with low child-teacher ratios, allowing for consistent opportunities for additional practice as preliminary learning takes place.

- To date Special Education has paid lip service to prevention, without disengaging from the model whereby first the child must fail, then his needs can be addressed. In a developmental model the talents of special educators for individualized "micro" teaching should be fully integrated with the regular curriculum.

- "Consultation" by special educators is of limited use to classroom teachers. Most classroom teachers are already "dancing as fast as they can." Their problem is not that they don't know what to do for struggling students, but that they don't have the time to do it.

- Initial supportive efforts should involve the least dramatic intervention as well as the least restrictive setting. Toward this end the variable most easily manipulated is teaching. The regular class curriculum and materials can be left intact and made appropriate for the whole population through individualized and small group teaching.

- Despite the increasing numbers of working mothers resources remain available in most communities for volunteer participation in early learning programs.

- Providing experiences where children can succeed allays anxiety and increases availability for learning.

- Competency gained in small group work increases ability to perform unsupervised independent work. Exposure to readily available adults in small groups does not foster dependency but, on the contrary, generates the confidence necessary for participation in self-directed activities in the classroom.

- "Early Provision" deals with both the problem of overdiagnosis and that of neglect. If there are no formalities for the initiation of individualized instruction, no child lacks immediate opportunity for treatment and no child is treated beyond his need.

- Successful school experiences build confidence and dissipate behavior problems.

- Prevention is the best intervention.

LOGISTICS

Children are selected by the classroom teachers at the end of the first week of school with consultation available from MSN (Moderate Special Needs) and Reading Teachers. Any child seen as at risk for adequate progress in the classroom is deemed eligible for the program. For example, a child whose beginning work in reading is satisfactory, but who cannot work independently or form letters correctly is provided for if the classroom teacher feels progress in the classroom is threatened. PROJECT SOLID START addresses development of any skill or behavior seen as essential to the language arts program of first grade.

Since children can enter or leave the program at the classroom teacher's discretion, and since the program remains open throughout the school year, the selection process is demystified. The contention that experienced teachers can identify young children at risk as well as formal evaluation instruments has been corroborated by our experience. This selection process has been cost effective in the immediate sense as

well as in its long range promise. There is no time lag prior to intervention as there is in typical evaluation procedures and none of the considerable costs of the usual testing, report writing and meetings.

A letter is sent to all first-grade parents at the very start of the school year explaining that PROJECT SOLID START is part of the regular program and thereby does not require any screening, testing or parent permission. This allows for immediate access and short-term or extended participation as best suits the child's needs.

The SOLID START PROGRAM is supplemental to the classroom reading program and does not replace daily reading with the classroom teachers. Visitors have been impressed by the availability of the children for an hour's concentrated reading and writing in the program in addition to their classroom work. They also notice that the children do not appear fatigued or restless. Our assumption is that given attention, recognition and opportunities for success, children become avid readers and writers.

Parent volunteers are selected by availability for participation one morning each week for an hour. They have been loyal and effective overall and have ranged in training from graduate students in education to high school graduates. There has been some attrition as mothers found paying jobs or had difficulty with child-care arrangements. The volunteers are offered brief individual training sessions of approximately 45 minutes as they are recruited and have been able to quickly grasp and model the main tenets of our program: encouragement of linguistic prediction, focus on meaning, graphophonemic observation and large doses of positive reinforcement.

METHOD

A meta-cognitive approach has been the overall governing principle, helping the children to become aware of their own behaviors and to assume control of their own learning. More than teaching reading, we teach the children how to become readers. By mid-year, they are aware of their own decoding strategies as well as attending and focusing behaviors.

The major thrust of our teaching has been that reading makes sense. Uncorrected miscalls are greeted with a gentle "take another look", or a query, often with introjected humor, about the likelihood of a sentence as read. In addition, learning to LOOK rather than to guess from initial letter or incomplete analysis is central with us. We find the children readily integrating and articulating the strategies we share. In "partner" reading

and writing, when the children work in pairs, we are continually gratified when we overhear them reminding each other of rehearsed techniques:

"Are we in a hurry?"
"Does that make sense?"
"Would your mother say that to you?"
"Did you really look?"

Our direction is first "making sense," and then visual analysis. For many of our children focal attention is not well developed and we want to foster habits of careful observation.

Our experience has been that we can write stories for the children that make sense and that offer some humor, fancy and literary form while rehearsing the material the children need to participate with a peer group in classroom activities. The texts we generate often respond to individual passions -- one child's reading was greatly facilitated by the inclusion of vampires and King Kong! Our materials have taken the form of charts, sentence strips, take-home notebooks and stories written in blank books. These teacher-made texts supplement our use of big books and trade books of all kinds. The children learn to work productively as partners, just as they do with adult supervision. We find that our ability to provide one-to-one support within a group setting allows for flexible response to individual needs as well as opportunities for group socialization -- often an area of need for SOLID START participants.

RESULTS

PROJECT SOLID START has served 51 children (some of them only briefly) out of a population of 144 over a period of three years. All the children exposed to the program read with confidence that written language makes sense. They employ consistent self-monitoring and seldom "bark at print." In addition, they all have legible handwriting and can participate with pleasure in the writing activities of their classrooms.

In the three years of the program, every child in first grade has learned to read and write. No child has been marginal in the sense of outside a peer group or unable to participate in a whole-class lesson or project. Three children have been retained, two in first and one in second grade. Of these, one child had a significant attention deficit disorder. In each case, retention was in response to ability to work independently rather than to reading progress.

When asked to cite the greatest benefit of the program as they saw it, the classroom teachers placed "attitude" even before skill growth. They felt that eliminating the need for discussion with parents of possible learning disability and bypassing testing reduced anxiety in families and contributed to the ease and confidence of the children and their enthusiasm for learning.

The pilot population is now in grade three. Four children out of a SOLID START population of 18 receive special needs services and one child is seen by the remedial reading teacher. Of these children, one child, significantly speech and language impaired, entered first grade with an educational plan. Another was born with multiple physical anomalies and experienced many hospitalizations in early childhood. Two of the remaining three children come from families with histories of learning disabilities.

Currently in grade two, out of an original SOLID START group of 21 children, three receive special needs services and 6 children are enrolled in remedial reading. Our records indicate that three second graders have been referred for special needs evaluations who were never identified for the SOLID START PROGRAM. In addition, one child who was not originally identified now receives remedial reading assistance. This emergence of special needs and remedial reading students at the grade two level corroborates our original contention that SOLID START should be a primary program, serving the K-3 years. (Funding, rather than philosophy, has dictated the grade one focus to date).

It is our view that this identification of children with reading or output problems in grade two does not suggest failure of our program's selection process. Rather, it appears that some children can manage the activities of beginning literacy successfully, but then become overtaxed by the increased independent work and increased pace of grade two.

In our most recent group, now, in grade one, one child has been referred out of a SOLID START population of 15.

These outcomes provide confirmation of the usefulness of a program of readily available, flexible, "regular" assistance for primary grade children. While our study remains preliminary, we can say with confidence that thus far no child in first grade has failed to make sustained progress and no child has been a marginal member of his class. In addition, the SOLID START program responds to several current and widely acknowledged educational goals. Our emphasis on cooperative learning among the children extends to

collaborative learning and teaching for participating staff. The team approach has broken down the loneliness, isolation and exaggerated responsibility of individual teachers and is a first step in our school toward building-based support teams. The enthusiasm and success of the children in the program speak to the value of preventative programs and a developmental approach.

This program remains outside contending beliefs and assumptions about reading methods to the extent that is says whatever the approach, the regular school program should provide an opportunity for all children to enjoy learning to read and write. The introduction of extra adults in the process of beginning literacy is a key expedient in accommodating varying rates of development and individual differences in learning style. Perhaps most important of all, the sense of the classroom as a community is enhanced when resources are marshalled so that all children can be active and progressing learners.